

Ursuline Academy, Academy Building
300 Augusta Street
San Antonio
Bexar County
Texas

HABS No. TX-32-A

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

URSULINE ACADEMY, ACADEMY BUILDING

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Location: 300 Augusta Street, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

Present Owner: San Antonio Conservation Society, San Antonio, Texas.

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Significance: This building was the first Academy building erected by the Ursulines after their arrival in San Antonio in 1851. It is the largest known building in Texas constructed of "rammed earth" or pise de terre and one of the few known true pise buildings in the state and possibly in the United States.

Whether the building may be considered a work of "French" architecture is conjectural. It was erected by a French Bishop for French Ursulines by a French architect and builder and in a French method of construction. Its plainness of style, however, makes it difficult to assess this building as showing significant Old World influences.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Circa 1851-52.
2. Architect: Probably Jules Poincard.
3. Original and subsequent owners: See History section of the Ursuline Academy, HABS No. TX-32.
4. Builder: Probably Jules Poincard.
5. Original plans and construction: The pise de terre method of construction is composed of caliche, a calcium carbonate formation.

The original number of rooms of the two-story building with galleries was ten.

6. Alterations and additions: The building was converted to other uses ca. 1910. The two lower west rooms were used as a sacristy and vesting room respectively, while those on the east were used as classrooms. The second floor was converted into an infirmary.

B. Historical Context: See History section of the Ursuline Academy, HABS No. TX-32.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Two-story galleries on the north and south elevations characterize the building.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair. There are signs of slight settlement but structurally the building appears sound. The stucco, however, is deteriorated and seems generally to be tenuously adhering to the walls. In many places the lower story has begun to fall away in patches thereby leaving the extremely vulnerable pise work exposed to the weather and certain deterioration. There appear to be no major structural cracks in the walls. There is some roof leakage.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building is a simple rectangle measuring approximately 28'-6" X 80'-0" and is one-story high. The front facade numbers five bays. The dimensions do not include the porches.
2. Foundation: The foundation is rubble limestone laid in lime mortar and projects approximately one foot above the ground surface. This base course is approximately one to two inches wider than the pise walls. It was stuccoed with a thick coat (1") of soft lime plaster finished in a light gray color. Later the color was changed to a darker blue-gray and still later to a very dark or charcoal blue-gray. All of this may be seen by examination where the plaster has fallen away from the rock surfaces.
3. Walls: The walls are of "rammed earth" or pise construction. The components seem to be a mixture of limestone gravel and caliche or lime. In the San Antonio and south Texas areas, caliche is found readily in natural deposits and seems to have been commonly used as a building material which during the nineteenth century was commonly called "concrete." At present the pise core of the walls is rather soft and crumbles to the touch.

A thick coat (1") of soft lime plaster or stucco covers and protects the pise core. Originally this soft, crumbly stucco was whitewashed but in recent years the exterior walls have been painted a uniform light brown.

4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing pise walls. There were originally four interior cross walls, also pise, but the one in the center of the east half of the building has been replaced with two boxed wood piers on the lower floor; the upper span is carried by a roof truss.

In addition there is a similar truss at the west end. These trusses which appear to be later additions are an inverted umbrella type with a center post and 2" by 6" radiating chords. Rafters are a full 2" x 6" at 33-1/2" with 3/4" x 3" stripping at 6" o.c., resting on 3-1/4" x 7-3/4" outside plates and morticed-and-tenoned with treenails at the ridge (no ridge member). Wall plate at east end is 3-1/4" x 9-1/2". Interior wall plates rest on top of pise walls and are 3-1/4" x 7-3/4" with 45° angle braces to outside plates, joined with complex dovetail joints. Attic floor system is 2" x 6" joists.

A wood member, 16" wide, indeterminate depth, spans the upper stair hall ceiling at the exterior walls. 45° angle braces may be seen tying into crosswalls.

5. Porches: Two-story porches on both the north and south elevations. These are supported by wood posts, 6" to 6-1/2" square; those on the lower floor rest on small square limestone stuccoed plinths.

A simple wood balustrade on the upper floors is set between supporting posts; it has simple top and bottom rails and square-section balusters.

Floors above are tongue-and-groove 1" x 4-1/4" yellow pine supported on 2" x 4" pine joists which frame into 2" x 6" pine girders at each post. Upper gallery ceiling is exposed 2" x 4" pine rafters and 1" x 5" tongue-and-groove pine sheathing. The stone blocks comprise the floor of the lower gallery and are 18" wide and of varying length. The north upper gallery has chambered posts measuring 7-1/4" x 7-3/4" and a beaded ceiling.

6. Chimneys: There were apparently only two chimneys in this building, one at the east and west end walls, respectively, centered and integral with the walls. The material was ashlar limestone and the dimensions were 17" x 23".

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are eight original doorways on the exterior walls, four on the north elevation and four on the south. All openings are splayed on the interior and completely cased in wood.

The central doorway on the lower floor of the south facade was the principal entrance to the building. The opening is framed with an unmolded wood architrave, 6" wide, set flush with the exterior plaster, and have miter joints at the corners and plain box plinths. The double doors (13" x 6'-3") each have two rectangular molded panels. A glass ventilating transom is above, with a four-light sash, a center post, a heavy rectangular-section transom bar and mutins.

The door immediately above the second floor is a composite double door made from a three-light wood sash casement window. Each door is attached to a lower panel, once part of a door. This door fills the framed opening, incorporating the old transom space. The upper north central door is identical.

On the north facade the lower central doorway and door are similar to that on the south, with the exception of the glass transom which was omitted.

Two other exterior doorways are located at the west ends of the south and north elevations, respectively. Both of the doors are later replacements with a plain 2" wide frame set inside the original architrave.

One additional doorway is located on the lower north facade at the east end and is a replacement like its counterpart at the west end.

On the upper floor in addition to the two central doorways described above, there are two others corresponding to those below on the west end of the north and south facades. These are identical sets of double doors, four lights per panel, but there is no transom on the north opening while the south has a six-light, in-swinging ventilating transom.

All exterior openings are framed with plain wood trim 1/2" x 6" for doorways and 1/2" x 5-1/2" to 5-7/8" for windows, with miter joints at the upper corners.

- b. Windows: The window openings are splayed and completely cased. Exterior architraves are the same as for doors. Wood sills are simple. The windows are inward opening wood casement sash. The shutters are wood, louvered.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Originally the roof was hipped at both ends. The hips were removed (although the principal framing was left) when the roof was extended to intersect the roofs of the east addition in 1853-1855 and the west addition (Chapel) in 1868-1870.

The original shingles are visible from the attic space. These were covered by the present standing-seam metal roof at a later date.

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- b. Belfry: A small wooden belfry is located on the ridge at the center of the building. The sides are louvered and the roof hipped and crowned with a cross. There are also roof hatches on each of the sides.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: Originally, the central stair hall was flanked on either side by two adjoining rooms. The central wall in the east half, however, has been replaced with two wood posts thereby creating one large room. The upper floor is similar.
2. Stairway: Located on the west wall of the central hallway is a straight stair with a landing. It is plain in design, and has a wood rail, square newel post and 3/4" square-section balusters. It was changed from the original stairway.
3. Flooring: In the lower floor there are various dimensions of yellow pine flooring: the far west and east rooms, 1" x 3-1/2"; the near west room 1" x 6-1/2"; stairhall, 1" x 3-3/8". The latter was originally painted blue-gray. The upper floor has 1" x 5-1/2" yellow pine flooring. All of the flooring in the first and second floors are interlocked by tongue-and-groove method.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls are plastered and painted. Later wood partitions are also painted.

First floor ceilings are butt jointed boards painted white. Second floor ceilings are tongue-and-groove boards with side and center bead.

Far west room on lower floor has a dado and ceiling of pressed metal in panel pattern. Other first floor rooms have a wainscot or show evidence of once having had them.

5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: All original doorways are splayed and fully cased in wood. Doors are wood, four-panel type.
6. Trim: Simple wood trim.
7. Hardware: Hardware varies but older doors as a rule have rim locks, thumb latch, slide bolts, hooks and butt hinges.
8. Mechanic equipment:
 1. Heating: Modern unvented gas heaters.
 2. Lighting: Miscellaneous modern fixtures, from fluorescents to bare bulbs.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building is oriented east to west with the south facade the principal elevation. The building is adjoined on both east and west ends with later additions. It faces onto a large yard enclosed by a high stone wall on the south. A narrow courtyard is formed on the north side by the 1866-1870 dormitory building. The Academy building is one of a total of eight that make up the old Ursuline complex.
2. Landscaping: Landscaping is minimal, principally scattered rose bushes in the north courtyard. The south yard has a few scattered shrubs and several large trees. A high stone wall encloses the courtyard on the south.

Prepared by: John C. Garner, Jr.
Director, Bexar County
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January 7, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermesen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Academy buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D. C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress. Dewey G. Mears of Austin, Texas took the documentary photographs of the San Antonio structures.